



THE NEW

Architecture

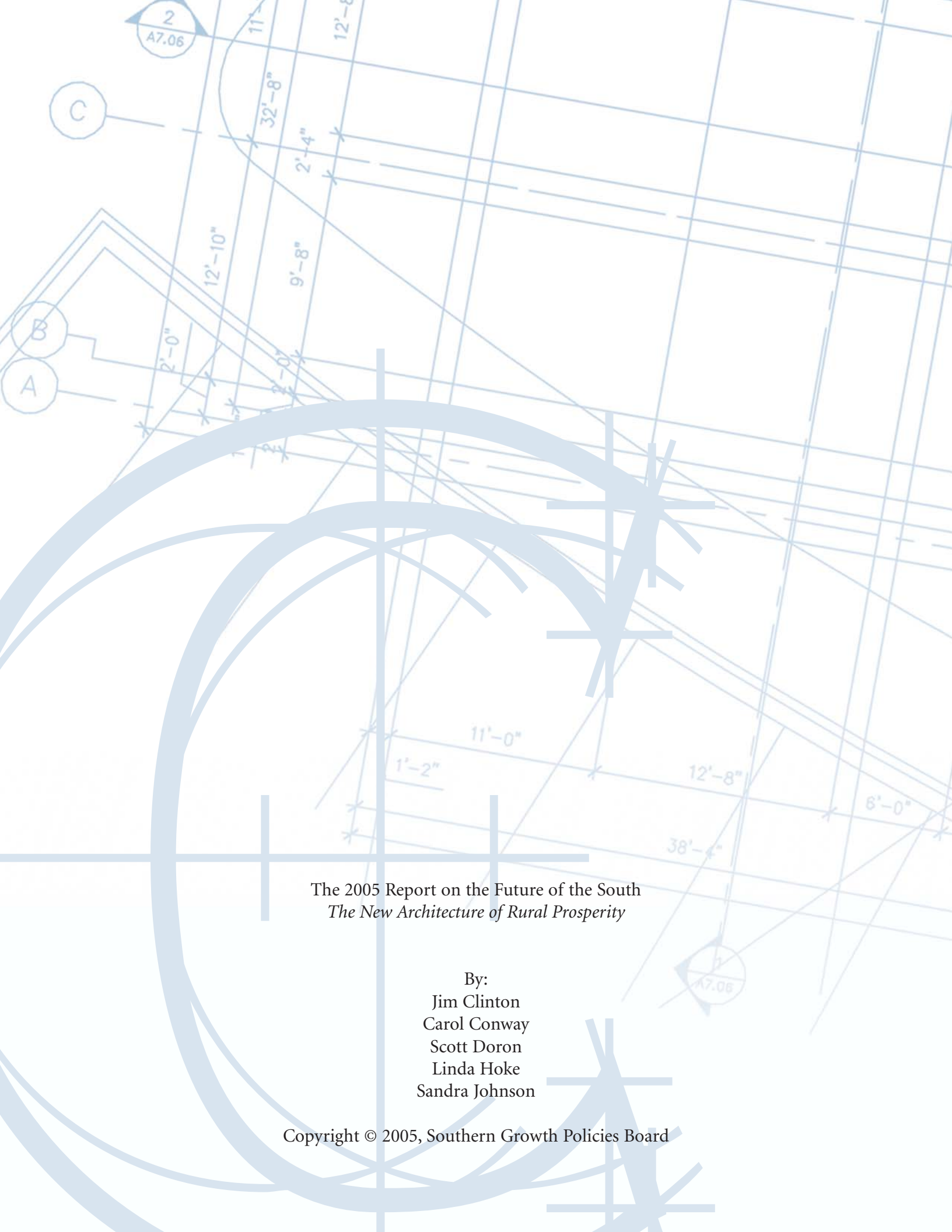
of Rural Prosperity

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

— Louis Henri Sullivan

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The 2005 Report on the Future of the South
The New Architecture of Rural Prosperity

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The prosperity of the rural South is crucial to the prosperity of the South as a whole. While only 20 percent of Americans live in rural areas, 34 percent of Southerners do.¹ Although measurable progress has been made in the past several decades, the rural South continues to lag the nation in terms of educational achievement, health care and economic performance. *The New Architecture of Rural Prosperity* is dedicated to closing the economic gap between the rural South and the nation as a whole.

In preparing for this report, Southern Growth Policies Board engaged more than 2200 Southerners in retreats, focus groups, community forums and surveys. More than anything else, the report is a response to the concerns, challenges, values and ideas expressed by all those volunteers.

The release of this report adds to the substantial body of existing work from public and private organizations regarding how rural communities can achieve greater prosperity. Southern Growth acknowledges with gratitude and admiration the work that has come before. Many have written about the importance of technology and innovation, entrepreneurship, workforce development and quality of life issues. Southern Growth itself is on record, for example, calling for the creation of a “culture of learning in the South.”²

These recommendations remain crucially important for the rural South. Serious and sustained attention to them is a prerequisite for future success. Since what should be done is a matter of some consensus, the mission of this report is the equally important question of how best to achieve these agreed-upon goals. The

research performed at Southern Growth and the conversations convened around it led to an examination of the economic development enterprise and these cardinal recommendations:

- Manage economic development as a set of interrelated activities that – directly and indirectly – create, expand and recruit businesses.
- Design and manage economic development along the lines of economic regions, without regard to traditional political boundaries.

The first chapter of this report amplifies both recommendations. The next chapter discusses how innovative Southerners are implementing the first recommendation. The following chapter is a review of regional initiatives. Following that is “Listening to the South,” a report on the retreat, forums, focus groups and survey that illuminate this work. The last chapter summarizes the recent work of other experts in rural economic development. Sprinkled throughout the report are entries from the Southern Growth Idea Bank, an online resource of best practices.

Among the important potential action items for states are:

- Help communities and citizens understand the whole economic development process.
- Encourage institutions of higher education to be fully engaged in economic development.
- Provide seed funding for regional initiatives.
- Use incentives to encourage regional collaboration.
- Given a dramatically-shifting funding environment, consider anew how economic development initiatives can and should be funded in the future.